

Four-year college students drink more, use marijuana less than community college peers

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Students at four-year colleges and universities drink nearly twice as much alcohol as their peers in two-year colleges, according to a survey of college students in the Seattle area. On the other hand, students in

community colleges and other two-year institutions use marijuana nearly twice as often as four-year students.

The results are detailed in a study led by a Washington State University researcher published in the *Journal of American College Health*.

"I expected differences in both alcohol and marijuana use among two- and four-year [college students](#), but was surprised by the magnitude of the differences given that the subjects are the same ages," said Jennifer Duckworth, an assistant professor in WSU's Department of Human Development and lead author of the paper.

More research is needed to understand why these differences in alcohol and [cannabis use](#) exist, but perceptions of peer use may be one factor. Specifically, four-year students thought their peers drank more than two-year students believed their peers drank, whereas two-year students thought that their peers used cannabis more than four-year students thought their peers did.

In the study, the authors found that among college students near Seattle, four-year students averaged over seven drinks per week, while two-year students averaged around 3.5 drinks each week, based on a self-reported questionnaire.

For marijuana use, two-year students averaged using it on more than eight days in the previous month, while four-year students averaged nearly 4.5 days of use.

Both groups reported experiencing consequences of their substance use, Duckworth said.

The study included 517 students who reported drinking in the past year and who were between the ages of 18-23 at two- and four-year schools in

Washington state. The [young adults](#) in the study filled out confidential online monthly surveys and received a stipend for participation. That combination of confidentiality, financial incentive, and ease of use led to a very high retention rate, Duckworth said.

She hopes to take the results of this study and conduct additional research on two-year students.

"Two-year students are a much harder group to study because they tend to have more variability in terms of age, work status, and they are more likely to be from underrepresented racial and/or ethnic minority groups," Duckworth said. "We know a lot more about four-year students, at least partly because most of the people doing the research are on four-year campuses."

Many four-year schools have research-based intervention programs to decrease the use of alcohol. She hopes to expand those to two-year campuses as well.

One such tool is a normative feedback intervention, which focuses on correcting misconceptions—in this case, misconceptions students have about peer substance use. Studies have shown that four-year students think their peers are using substances much more than they really are.

"If you think your peers are drinking more than they really are, that leads you to drink more," said Duckworth, who hopes to create and implement something similar for two-year students and [marijuana use](#).

"Two-year students are using marijuana more than four-year [students](#), but they also think their peers are using it more than they probably are," she said. "I say probably because we need more research to assess peer use. It's an important next step is studying this often understudied population."

Duckworth wrote the paper with Devon Abdallah, Michael Gilson, and Christine Lee, all from the University of Washington.

More information: Jennifer C. Duckworth et al, Alcohol and marijuana use, consequences, and perceived descriptive norms: Differences between two- and four-year college students, *Journal of American College Health* (2022). DOI: [10.1080/07448481.2022.2060043](https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2060043)

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